



Testimony on the Michigan Promise Zone Act – HB5375

To: State of Michigan House Education Committee

Date: Tuesday, November 27, 2007

My name is Lynn Heemstra. I am Administrator for the Office of Children, Youth & Families, a public-private partnership of the City of Grand Rapids, the Grand Rapids Public Schools, and the community. My office exists to evaluate public policy in the best interests of children and their families and to promote partnerships and investments in innovative programming to ensure children succeed. I am here representing Mayor George K. Heartwell who is a strong advocate for education, for children, and for our economic prosperity. It is a pleasure to be able to testify this morning for the proposed Michigan Promise Zones Act as put forth in House Bill No. 5375 and as introduced by Senator VanWoerkem in Senate Bill No. 861.

The need for secondary education is well-known. The most vibrant and economically thriving communities are those that have a high number of college-educated professionals in cities that are attractive places to live. Our path to higher prosperity is in knowledge-based enterprises<sup>1</sup>. It is critical that as a State and as the second largest city in Michigan - Grand Rapids, we invest in higher education. For children to succeed, they must have all the supports that help them see college as a reality and achieve a college education as a goal. With a current poverty rate of 33.1% of children under 18 years living in Grand Rapids, we have our work cut out for us.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, Grand Rapids has a collaborative spirit and good history of working together to address the needs of its children and youth.

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<sup>1</sup> "A New Agenda for a New Michigan," Report by Michigan Future, Inc., June 2006

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey

We currently have several initiatives underway to address education reform, literacy, early childhood, communities in schools, and after school programs. Our local foundations and community partners have been very generous.

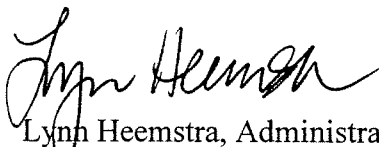
We in Grand Rapids -- particularly Mayor Heartwell -- know that the Grand Rapids Public School system and the promise of higher education is critically important to ensure our economic success as a city. Mayor Heartwell and others have seen the incredible economic impact that the Kalamazoo Promise has had on our West Michigan neighbor. Certainly, there are many people locally who are asking, “why can’t it happen in Grand Rapids?” While we have yet to learn from the Kalamazoo Promise, cost is an issue. The legislation as proposed for the Michigan Promise Zones is a spark to move communities into action. It is the added incentive to cities where heretofore the task has been too daunting to tackle alone.

The Michigan Promise Zones Act does three key things:

- 1.) It promotes, actually requires, local control and ownership in communities that have higher than average poverty rates for children with a promise of financial help. It relies on local and private initiative first and foremost and then provides extra support for what to most communities is a mammoth undertaking. Thus, the legislation allows for each community to design and implement their own fund-raising within their own local context. It leaves critical decisions about the scope of the promise in local hands.
- 2.) It supports public-private partnerships among local investors, community partners, and governmental entities which ensures a more solid foundation for sustainability and success. These models work and make sense. No one entity can do it alone nor should they on what is a shared vision for education and our economy.
- 3) It provides an economic stimulus to municipalities and offers the hope of feasibility. For communities who do not have a lone major funding source such

as the Kalamazoo Promise, this legislation provides local communities with a powerful tool they can use to develop their local economies as well as offer residents the promise of secondary education. What an attractive proposition to businesses, parents, and city leaders alike! A relatively small investment on the state's part can unlock tremendous local support.

The promise of a guaranteed college education is a dream come true for children. And, while the promise provides the hope, we know we must continue to ensure that children have what they need in a K12 education to get them to the point of seizing the college opportunity and staying with it for four years. As education reform efforts and schools of innovation are being developed in Grand Rapids, we join with many other municipalities in welcoming legislation that enhances the possibility of higher education for all children regardless of circumstance. Together, as partners, we can build a brighter future for the State of Michigan, for our cities, and for our children.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lynn Heemstra". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Lynn" being more prominent than the last name "Heemstra".

Lynn Heemstra, Administrator  
Office of Children, Youth & Families  
[lheemstr@grcity.us](mailto:lheemstr@grcity.us)  
616-456-4353